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Can We Talk to the Animals?

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OF ALL THE CREATURES that have lived on earth, perhaps none has so fascinated and disturbed man as the dinosaur. Remains of these incredible land reptiles, which ranged in size from 2 feet to 90 feet—the length of a basketball court—were first unearthed in the nineteenth century, and in the ensuing years paleontologists have learned that they ruled the earth for 140 million years before vanishing inexplicably into the mists of time. How, it is asked again and again, could a monster so large and so mighty, which completely dominated the world's land masses for eons beyond counting, have vanished with no trace save the fossilized bones that testify to its existence? What happened to it?

Our heart raced faster when word first reached us of the *mokele-mbembe*. For some years, it seems, natives of an unmapped, virtually unexplored region of the Congo between the Sangha and Oubangui Rivers, have been reporting sightings of a reptile said to be 40 feet long, and in 1980 a University of Chicago biologist named Roy Mackal visited the area, armed with pictures of a variety of different animals—some from that region, some from other parts of the world, some prehistoric. When he showed them to the natives they correctly identified all the animals from their locale—including a drawing of a sauropod, a semiaquatic dinosaur, which they referred to as *mokele-mbembe*.

In November 1981 Dr. Mackal led a team back into the swamps between the two tributaries of the Congo River and spent five weeks locating and talking with some two dozen natives from different villages and tribes who claimed to have seen the creature. The closest the Mackal party came to their quarry was a year-old trail leading to a river, where the grass had been flattened to a width of more than 6 feet, where branches had been broken to a similar height, and where they found an elephantlike footprint about 10 inches in diameter. When we asked

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Dr. Mackal if it could have been a trail left by an elephant he said he didn't think so; the experienced native hunter who led them to it had tried earlier without success to see where the trail emerged from the river (elephants, apparently, get out of a river not far from where they got into it and are relatively easy to track). "Finding this creature is a lot like searching for the end of the rainbow," Dr. Mackal observed. "When you're there in the rainy season they tell you to come back when it's dry. When you arrive in a village where someone claims to have seen it, they tell you someone has just spotted it in the village you left behind."

While we wish Dr. Mackal and his colleagues well in their next expedition to the Congo, we can't help but hope that *mokele-mbembe* may elude their cameras and their clutches and remain—like the Loch Ness and Lake Champlain monsters—an unfound Grail to stir man's imagination and trouble his dreams.

A recent theory concerning the expiration of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous era, 65 million years ago, has been advanced by Dr. Walter Alvarez, a geologist, and a group of associates that includes his father, Dr. Luis Alvarez, a Nobel laureate in physics. According to the Alvarez thesis, a gigantic asteroid may have smashed into the earth, setting off tidal waves and earthquakes, and throwing so much dust and debris into the sky that the sun was obscured for a period of three years. With the world in darkness, temperatures plummeted, photosynthesis ceased, and food chains on land and in the seas collapsed. And with that, the dinosaurs expired. (Except, just possibly, for *mokele-mbembe*.) Not all scientists subscribe to the Alvarez hypothesis, to

be sure, yet there seems to be general agreement that whatever did occur at the end of the Cretaceous era, it was something cataclysmic.

WE CAN'T VOUCH FOR IT, of course, but the fate of the dinosaurs may have been in the minds of many Vermont voters this March when 192 towns considered a motion calling for a moratorium on the spread of nuclear weapons. In all but 31 of those towns, the motion was approved (in West Windsor, where the vote was unanimous, the citizens rose to their feet in a body and sang "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"). A few days later the Vermont House of Representatives passed the resolution, 103 to 26, and the message went forth to the state's three-man Congressional delegation in Washington to urge President Reagan to propose a mutual nuclear arms freeze with the Soviet Union. What the voters in 161 towns in this small state were suggesting was not, as some opponents of the measure seemed to think, that America let down its guard, but simply that the two major nuclear powers talk to each other, instead of yelling, and keep on talking until they arrive at a solution to the only real issue of our time—the one beside which all others are as nothing.

The idea of a nuclear weapons moratorium was not, after all, a new one, and the majority of those Vermont voters were on the side of some very wise men. Twenty-five years ago, General of the Army Omar N. Bradley gave a talk at St. Alban's School in Washington, D.C., in which he said, "The central problem of our time . . . is how to employ human intelligence for the salvation of mankind." He could see that the world was "speeding inexorably toward a day when even the ingenuity of our scientists may be unable to save us from the consequences of a single rash act or a lone reckless hand upon the switch of an uninterceptible missile." Then as now, the only hope we cling to is that "no government, no single group of men . . . would be so foolhardy, so reck-